

LEARNING TO WRITE IN THE CHEROKEE SYLLABARY

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1. Introduction. The Cherokees are famous for their writing system, the syllabary invented by Sequoyah in about 1820. The syllabary was used extensively by Cherokees through the nineteenth century, but in recent years literacy in Cherokee has declined. This paper describes how Virginia Carey, a native speaker of Cherokee who lives in southern California, taught herself to write in the syllabary during 1993 and 1994. Most of Mrs. Carey's progress in writing took place as she worked on an account of the Northridge earthquake that occurred in January, 1994. The fact that Mrs. Carey set out to write about such a thing in Cherokee is remarkable. It is a commonplace in Cherokee studies that the syllabary is rarely used for writing nowadays. And it is surprising that Mrs. Carey wrote about a current event, since the syllabary today is associated primarily with ceremonial contexts. Some influential Cherokees are trying to revive literacy in the syllabary by urging a return to older practices, in which writing in Cherokee was associated with a wide range of contexts and not just with religion. Mrs. Carey's experience lends some weight to that approach, and suggests that one way to revive literacy in Cherokee is to encourage people to write about things that are important to them. I present some background information on the syllabary and its cultural significance in section 2, and I discuss Mrs. Carey's experiences in using the syllabary in section 3. I offer conclusions in section 4.¹

2. Background. In 1821 Sequoyah gave an official demonstration of his syllabary. The characters of the syllabary are shown on the next page in Figure 1, a reproduction of the chart that appears at the front of the Cherokee New Testament, which is probably the most widely owned book printed in the syllabary. Even non-Christians own copies, and it has been common for people to learn to read the syllabary from the New Testament. In the chart, each syllabary character appears to the left of its transliteration; this transliteration and the arrangement of the characters were devised in 1825 by Samuel A. Worcester, a missionary to the Cherokees.

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CHEROKEE ALPHABET.

CHARACTERS SYSTEMATICALLY ARRANGED WITH THE SOUNDS.

| | | | | | |
|------------------|-----------|-----------|-------|-------|--------|
| D a | R e | T i | o o | o u | i v |
| g ga o ka | k go | y gi | A go | J gu | E gv |
| o ha | p he | A hi | F ho | F hu | o hv |
| W la | s le | f li | G lo | M lu | o lv |
| k ma | o me | H mi | o mo | y mu | |
| o na t hna G nah | A ne | h ni | Z no | q nu | o nv |
| T qua | o que | o qui | o quo | o quu | g quv |
| o s u sa | t se | b si | t so | y su | R sv |
| o da W ta' | o de t te | J di J ti | V to | S du | J dv |
| o dla f tla | L tle | C tli | Y tlo | o tlu | P tl v |
| G tsa | V tse | h tsi | K tso | J tsu | C ts v |
| G wa | o we | o wi | o wo | o wu | g wv |
| o ya | g ye | o yi | f yo | G yu | B vv |

Figure 1. The Cherokee syllabary

The symbol "D" at the top left of the chart is the syllabary character that stands for *ga* (/a/). Moving to the right across the top row are the symbols for *ge* (/e/), *gi* (/i/), *go* (/o/), *gu* (/u/), and *gv* (/v/). The columns are arranged according to the alphabetical order of the transliteration, so the first column for the most part represents syllables with *g*, the second syllables with *k*, and so on. The rows represent various combinations of consonants with those vowels. Once again the characters are arranged according to the alphabetical order of the transliteration, with *k* treated like *g*, and *d* treated like *t*. Some syllabary charts include sample English words to show how the letters of the transliteration are to be pronounced; some include sample Cherokee words to show how the characters are used to represent sounds.

By 1825, interest in the syllabary had grown to the point that young Cherokees would travel great distances to learn to write, and then return home to teach others.² It is possible that up to one-half or two-thirds of the Cherokees were literate in the syllabary in the mid-1820s (McLoughlin 1986:353). During the rest of the nineteenth century, Cherokees used

²For information on Sequoyah and the development of the syllabary see Mooney 1900:108-113; Foreman 1938; Walker 1969, 1975, 1981, 1984; McLoughlin 1984, 1986, 1990; Walker and Sarbaugh 1993.

the syllabary in religious, political, legal, and informational publications, and in letters, diaries, account books, church records, minutes of meetings, and notebooks of medical prayers and formulas (Wahrhaftig 1970:210-21, Walker 1981:147).

Literacy in the syllabary has contributed to a perception of the Cherokees as perhaps the most "civilized" of the Five Civilized Tribes of the southeast. It is well known that language is an important symbol of identity for Cherokees, as for others, and the cultural significance of the syllabary has also been noted (Spicer 1971, Neely 1991:49). Over a hundred years ago, James Mooney (1892:64) wrote that the syllabary is something that Cherokees "love because it is Indian". Willard Walker (1969:153) has observed that even Cherokees who do not read the language have an emotional attachment to the syllabary. Literacy was widespread well into this century: a survey of four Cherokee communities conducted in 1964-65 showed that from 36 to 65% of adults over thirty were literate in Cherokee. In those communities, between 40 and 83% of households included at least one person who could read the Cherokee language (Wahrhaftig 1970:20-21).

In the twentieth century, the syllabary is read far more often than it is written. Literacy has become increasingly identified with two ceremonial contexts: Christian church services and the practice of traditional medicine (Wahrhaftig 1970, Walker 1981, Feeling 1985). Members of Cherokee churches read aloud from the Cherokee New Testament during Sunday school, and preachers and deacons read aloud during church services. Traditional Indian doctors or conjurers may record and read their prayers and prescriptions. People generally do not learn to read Cherokee until, as adults, they become seriously interested in religious activities, which require specialized knowledge. Therefore literacy in Cherokee has become associated with adulthood and knowledge and spiritual maturity (Wahrhaftig 1970, Walker 1981).

The Cherokee language is still used in traditional communities, but the number of speakers is decreasing. In the mid 1980s, the number of Cherokee speakers was estimated, perhaps generously, at about 16,000, with about 15,000 in Oklahoma and fewer than 1,000 in North Carolina (estimates from Duane King, p.c.) The number is falling as older speakers die and fewer children learn the language, but even now a small number of children start school speaking only Cherokee (Sallie Sevenstar, p.c.), and new programs are introducing Cherokee into the public school curriculum. Still, literacy decreases as use of the language decreases. Cherokee churches and traditional medicine are losing their status as contexts for literacy. Fewer Cherokee churches conduct services in Cherokee, as English becomes the language of worship (Feeling and Pulte 1987). In the past, church records were kept in Cherokee, but now they may be kept in English. It was once considered necessary for the officers of Cherokee churches to be able at least to read the old records, written in the syllabary, but this requirement has been relaxed as the number of readers has declined. Although many people are interested in traditional Cherokee medicine, interest alone may not be enough to sustain traditional practices. Some traditional doctors believe that a potential apprentice must be a fluent Cherokee speaker and must be able to read the syllabary; fewer people now meet those requirements and some doctors have difficulty finding apprentices.

In the face of declining literacy in Cherokee, literacy and the syllabary remain important to conceptions of Cherokee identity. The ability to read Cherokee remains a highly-valued skill. People admire those who can read the syllabary, and younger people express their desire to learn the syllabary so that they can read the Cherokee Bible and discover the contents of family holdings of manuscripts. Such admiration and desire, however, do not necessarily lead to learning.

Though literacy is declining, popular interest in the syllabary and the Cherokee language has increased markedly in the past fifteen years. It is no coincidence that during the same period membership in the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma has grown from 40,000 to almost 150,000. The increase in enrollment reflects the growth of interest in genealogy, the perception that economic benefits accrue to Indians, and the cachet now associated with having Indian ancestry. A visit to northeastern Oklahoma shows clearly that even to outsiders and to Cherokees who do not speak or read the Cherokee language, the syllabary is an important symbol of Cherokee identity.³ Syllabary characters appear on the seal of the Cherokee Nation and on signs around Tahlequah, the capital of the Cherokee Nation. The past ten years have seen a proliferation of souvenirs decorated with the syllabary, including pottery trivets, hats, T-shirts, tote bags, clocks and watches, broadsides of syllabary charts, and broadsides of the Lord's Prayer or "Amazing Grace" in Cherokee and English. John Sixkiller, a bilingual optician, developed a syllabary eye chart to use in examining the vision of older Cherokees who cannot read English. The popularity of the syllabary is so great that Sixkiller sold T-shirts depicting the eye chart and he sold copies of the chart as artwork. There has also been a sharp increase in the number of tapes and books purporting to teach the language or the syllabary. These are sold throughout northeastern Oklahoma, and they are prominently advertised in two monthly newspapers aimed at Cherokee audiences, the Cherokee Advocate and the Cherokee Observer.⁴

Literacy in Cherokee is highly valued by all Cherokees, but in different ways. For less traditional Cherokees, the syllabary is a symbol of Cherokee identity and achievement and tradition. For more traditional Cherokees, literacy is valued as an ability that is characteristic of respected Cherokee adults. Among these more traditional Cherokees, a distinction is developing between those who live with literacy and those for whom literacy is an ideal. Those who live with literacy, whether literate themselves or living with someone who is

³In a paper presented at the 1993 meetings of the American Society for Ethnohistory, Margaret Bender discussed attitudes toward literacy and the syllabary among Cherokees in North Carolina. Her findings for North Carolina Cherokees are congruent with mine for Oklahoma Cherokees.

⁴The Cherokee Advocate is the official newspaper of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma. It is published in English, with occasional advertisements printed in both Cherokee and English. The Cherokee Observer is an independent newspaper. It publishes some items in the syllabary, such as portions of the Cherokee Constitution of 1838, and it regularly includes lessons to teach the syllabary and a "Kid's Corner" with Cherokee-language songs, phrases, or word games.

literate, tend to be older. Those for whom literacy is an ideal are often younger people: they may be able to speak Cherokee, but it is possible and perhaps even likely that they will never learn to read it.

There are many tensions between Cherokees who are more and less traditional--these tensions are reflected in discussions about differences between people with different degrees of Indian blood. But the syllabary and literacy have not themselves become the focus of contention. It is possible for people to value literacy and also to value the syllabary as a symbol. Indeed, the two value systems are not only compatible, but even support each other. There are some who feel that literacy should be the private domain of traditional spiritual leaders, but in general the increased visibility of the syllabary confers prestige on the Cherokee language and those who speak and read it; at the same time, the existence of traditionalists who are literate in Cherokee confers legitimacy on the syllabary as a symbol of Cherokee identity. But Cherokees do not agree on how to respond to the decline in literacy. A number of divisive political issues confront any attempts to maintain or revive the Cherokee language, whether in spoken or written form (see Feeling 1985, Feeling and Pulte 1987, Brooks 1992). Just how endangered is the language? How valuable are language maintenance programs? Is there a role for tribal, state, or federal government? What are the proper contexts for the Cherokee language and Cherokee literacy?

The weakening of the traditional contexts for literacy may be an ominous sign for the survival of the syllabary. Kathleen Bragdon (1993) has claimed that literacy in Massachusetts was lost because the contexts for that literacy disappeared. Durbin Feeling (1985) sees the possibility of a similar future for Cherokee. He argues that the very circumstances which have encouraged reading in Cherokee have discouraged people from writing it: many Cherokees feel great reverence toward Cherokee writing because of its associations with the sacred, and to some people it seems wrong to use the syllabary for writing secular material. Feeling and others are trying to preserve and revive literacy in Cherokee by expanding the contexts for literacy and encouraging writing and reading outside of ceremonial contexts.⁵ Cherokee typewriters have been available for many years, but the development of new computerized fonts for incorporating Cherokee into word-processing programs has made it easy to prepare professional-looking documents in the syllabary.

There has been some official effort to build support for literacy instruction and maintenance throughout the Cherokee-speaking population. Course materials have been developed for use in adult classes, where Cherokee speakers are taught to read and to teach others. In the summer of 1993, a committee that included educators, and officials and employees of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma organized a Cherokee Language Summit, to

⁵Many different individuals and groups have been concerned with language maintenance and revival during the past 35 years. Recently, an upsurge of interest in language-related issues has accompanied the spread of awareness among Cherokees that the language is endangered. Recent activities have been encouraged by the federal Native American Languages Acts of 1990 and 1992, and by Oklahoma legislation that requires public schools to teach foreign languages.

which people throughout northeastern Oklahoma were invited. Announcements were printed in Cherokee and in English, and circulated in Cherokee churches, asking people to "Come and share with us your ideas and thoughts on what practical and realistic steps we, as CHEROKEE PEOPLE and as individuals, can take to help maintain and promote the Cherokee language and Cherokee literacy." The Summit was attended by about 100 adults; perhaps three-quarters or more were Cherokee speakers, though far fewer could read Cherokee. The meeting may represent a step toward consensus in the political struggles that surround the preservation and teaching of the language and the syllabary, but historically the use of the Cherokee language has been mostly independent of any official support (see Monteith 1984, Walker and Sarbaugh 1993, Perdue 1994). The Cherokee language and syllabary are associated with full-bloods and traditionalists, but educational institutions and governments, whether tribal, state, or federal, are associated with mixed-bloods and non-Indians. It remains to be seen whether maintenance programs can overcome political factionalism, and whether they can be successful. The fact that the Summit was conceived as a meeting of Cherokee adults, with an emphasis on individuals, communities, and churches rather than on institutions and formal instruction may bode well for the future (see discussion in Walker 1969, 1984).

3. Mrs. Carey's experiences in learning the syllabary. For several years, I have worked with Cherokee speakers on translating Cherokee materials that were written in the syllabary during the nineteenth century. During the fall of 1993 and into January of 1994, I did some of this work with Virginia Carey, a native speaker of Cherokee from near Tahlequah, Oklahoma, who has lived in the Los Angeles area for about 40 years. Mrs. Carey is fluent in both Cherokee and English--she speaks Cherokee with her husband, who is also a native speaker, and with friends and relatives, and she makes frequent trips back to Oklahoma.

Mrs. Carey was intrigued by the old materials I brought her, especially a facsimile of the 1851 Cherokee Almanac, which contains a number of homilies printed in the syllabary without providing English translations. Mrs. Carey wanted to help me translate passages from the almanac, and she told me that when she was a girl, she knew how to read the syllabary, but that she had forgotten how and gotten rusty. She said that she had put the syllabary aside when she went to school, but as we worked on the texts from the almanac, she often said that her knowledge was coming back to her. Still, Mrs. Carey is not a fluent reader, and she says that she never has been fluent. She says that everyone is very slow and hesitant in reading, but I have not found that to be the case.

Most Cherokees that I have spoken with, however, agree that the syllabary can be hard to read. For one thing, most of the available printed material was created with relatively small typefaces. The small type and the potentially confusing design of some of the characters can make it hard work to read unfamiliar texts. Manuscript material typically has larger letters, but it can be difficult to decipher unfamiliar handwriting and to learn the idiosyncracies of a particular writer's hand.

The similarities between some syllabary characters can make them hard to distinguish in printed Cherokee, especially when the typeface is small or blurred. Some troublesome

sets are listed in (1). The two syllabary characters shown in (1a) would both be considered "W" by a reader familiar only with the Roman alphabet, but in the syllabary one represents la and the other represents ta. Likewise, the two characters in (1b) could both be called "R", but in the syllabary one represents e and the other represents sy.

(1) Pairs of similar-looking syllabary characters

| | | | | |
|----|---|-----------|---|-----------|
| a. | W | <u>la</u> | W | <u>ta</u> |
| b. | R | <u>e</u> | R | <u>sy</u> |
| c. | Θ | <u>na</u> | Θ | <u>wi</u> |
| d. | œ | <u>s</u> | œ | <u>ya</u> |
| e. | ß | <u>ye</u> | B | <u>yy</u> |

Despite the difficulties, Mrs. Carey persevered and she became interested in learning, or relearning, the syllabary. She made herself a set of flash cards with syllabary symbols on one side and the transliteration on the other. She decided to work independently on one of the almanac texts. She consulted a syllabary chart like that in Figure 1, but with a slightly different transliteration, and she wrote out texts in Roman letters for us to review together.

Then, in the middle of January, the Northridge earthquake struck. There was widespread damage throughout the area, and the quake and aftershocks were very upsetting to Mrs. Carey, as to others in the region. After about two weeks, Mrs. Carey decided to write about the earthquake in Cherokee. She wrote her account say in Cherokee, in Roman letters, as in (2), which shows the way she wrote the words "January", the first word of her text, and "this month", the second. Following common practice, Mrs. Carey writes hyphens between the syllables of each word when she uses Roman letters to write Cherokee.

(2) u-no-iv-ta-na ji-ka-li⁶

Then she used her syllabary chart to find the corresponding syllabary characters, and she wrote them in on top, as in (3) on the next page.

⁶In writing Cherokee with Roman letters, Mrs. Carey uses the letter j rather than the ts that appears in the eleventh row of the chart in Figure 1.

- (3) O'ZAWO I'OP
 u-no-lv-ta-na ji-ka-li

Then she made a clean copy of the text in the syllabary. After she had written the story, she showed me the syllabary version, and then she revised the text over a period of about a month. When she was satisfied with it, I typed it for her. The final version appears in (4), followed by an English translation prepared by Mrs. Carey and me.

- (4) Mrs. Carey's account of the Northridge earthquake:

O'ZAWO I'OP I'AWSLAT I'APWA OY O'SIBUIR ROO
OY KWAJ DCPR SV O'P'EQOT. HSL LGWO S'OR
O'P'BS FRT. O'WAE O SV O'P'EQOT. S'PKS DO OZJ
O'AIL S'ECT. BO J'LORT SH'ET'4I VJ DS'OT
DHOT. JO'AI J'HC SH'EB'ET, DO LO'J'OT O'ETW
O'H'ET. KT TG'OVLT'AI I'FR EGP'EQ O SVJ R'JW
R'P'AI F'IT. HSL BO DH'OS+ WP'AT O'CHYL SV
O'P'EQIT. O'HAIL BO DOLOD JO'ET JA CH'OS.

by Virginia Carey

This January, in the year 1994, at four thirty in the morning, the earth shook. All the lights went out, and it was dark. The ground shook without stopping. Houses and roads were badly damaged. People lost their homes and were sitting out in the rain. Little children were hungry, and they were crying; they sounded very sorrowful. It's been three weeks since it shook, but it seems like just yesterday. All the people are afraid the ground will shake strongly a second time. Many people are moving, going east.

In the course of revising her text, Mrs. Carey added and changed a few words, but most of the revisions were corrections of errors that she had made in using the syllabary

characters.⁷ In her account of the earthquake, and in other things she has written in Cherokee, almost all of Mrs. Carey's errors reflect the interference of English spelling as she writes Cherokee words in Roman letters and looks up transliterations in the syllabary chart. Some typical errors are listed in (5).

(5) Common errors in writing with the syllabary

- a. using Cu characters in place of Cv characters: ʎ nu for ʎ ny
- b. using Ca characters in place of Ce characters: ʎ na for ʎ ne
- c. using Ce characters in place of Ci characters: ʎ le for ʎ li
- d. using V do in place of S du
- e. using ʎ ha in place of ʎ na, and using ʎ hi in place of ʎ ni
- f. using ʎ di in place of ʎ ti

As shown in (5a) Mrs. Carey will occasionally use characters that represent consonant-y syllables, like ny, where she should use characters that represent consonant-v syllables, like ny. This is understandable in light of the fact that in English words like "but" and "under", the letter y is pronounced much like the Cherokee v. Indeed, words like "but" and "under" are typically used to illustrate the pronunciation of the letter y in transliterations. Some people who write Cherokee in Roman letters never use the letter v, perhaps because they know that it is used so differently in English spelling. These writers prefer instead to use y or yh or yn.

Other common errors include using consonant-a characters, like na, in place of consonant-e characters, like ne, and using consonant-e characters, like le, in place of consonant-i characters, like li (5b-c). These errors are just like the mistakes made by English-speaking students who are learning to use the phonetic alphabet. Even in the face of numerous example words, it is difficult for English readers to learn to associate the letter e /i/ with the sound /e/, which we associate with the letter a; and it is difficult to learn to associate the letter i /aj/ with the sound /i/, which we associate with the letter e. Similarly, Mrs. Carey will often write the character for do in place of the character for du (5d), since she associates the combination of the letters d and o with the English word "do" /du/.

⁷It is not uncommon to find errors in written Cherokee. In April, 1994 the Cherokee Advocate printed an advertisement addressed to Cherokee speakers. The ad was printed in English and in Cherokee, and the Cherokee version included a number of mistakes, including the confusion of similar-looking characters; for example, the ad used the character for la in place of la (see (1a)), and used g in place of ya (see (1d)).

Another set of errors (5e) involves using the character for *ḥa* in place of *ḥa*, and the character for *ḥi* in place of *ḥi*; this second error is especially common. The fact that the Roman letters *h* and *n* are similar in form in both upper and lower case, may be part of the difficulty, but I suspect that most of the problem arises from the fact that the symbol for *ḥi* looks like a lower-case *h*. This must establish an association between the letter *h* and the sound *ḥ* such that in looking up an *n*-vowel syllable, Mrs. Carey may notice an *h*-vowel sequence in the transliterations on the syllabary chart and then use the adjacent syllabary character instead of the appropriate *n*-vowel symbol.

The only common error that does not seem to reflect interference from the Roman alphabet is Mrs. Carey's substitution of *ḡi* for *ḡi* (5f). That the two symbols look so much alike may contribute to their being confused. In addition, Chafe and Kilpatrick (1963:62) noted that when the syllabary provides separate symbols for voiced and voiceless consonants (like *ḡ* and *ḡ*), there is a tendency for one of the symbols to be used in place of the other, and they found that the symbol for *ḡi* was almost obsolete.⁸ In some other samples of written Cherokee, I have found the symbol for *ḡi* used in place of *ḡi*.

The errors made by Mrs. Carey are likely to be made by others who are learning to use the syllabary. Almost everyone who learns to read and write Cherokee will already read and write English and will make use of syllabary charts that include Roman-letter transliterations. People will naturally use what they know about the sounds of letters in English when they try to write Cherokee, and even with sample words and pronunciation guides people seem to have difficulty in matching vowel sounds with transliterations. Syllabary charts like the one in Figure 1 have been used for almost 170 years, and there is no reason to expect that to change. Eventually, each reader and writer must learn to associate the Cherokee characters with their pronunciations rather than with the transliterations, but since most materials for teaching and learning the syllabary make heavy use of syllabary charts and transliteration, beginners are likely to make errors like Mrs. Carey's. It is interesting that none of these errors involve interference between the syllabary characters and their resemblance to Roman letters. As shown at the top left corner of the syllabary chart in Figure 1, character for the syllable *ḡa* is basically a capital "D", but I have never seen or heard that symbol used for the syllable *ḡa* or any other syllable with a *ḡ* sound. Despite the fact that many syllabary characters resemble Roman letters, they are regarded as signs for syllables, not segments, and they are separate in people's minds from the Roman alphabet. It is more difficult for people to separate the Roman alphabet as used for English from the Roman alphabet as used for representing the sounds of Cherokee.

The likelihood of making errors is an important issue for people learning to read and write in Cherokee. It is well known that Cherokees are in general very concerned about the proper use of their language, written or spoken, and that Cherokees tend to avoid doing things that they cannot do well. An understanding of common errors that will occur when people write in the syllabary can be used to help people correct or avoid them.

⁸For discussion of the ways in which orthographies represent the contrasts between Cherokee voiced and voiceless, or plain and aspirated, sounds, see Scancarelli 1992.

4. Conclusion. An immediate result of Mrs. Carey's writing her story about the earthquake was her decision to refine her knowledge of the syllabary by studying it systematically. She began to work through the lessons in Durbin Feeling's See-Say-Write book (Feeling, ed. 1991), which is used to teach the syllabary to adult Cherokee speakers in classes in Oklahoma. Mrs. Carey also began to spend time reading a Cherokee hymnal and the Cherokee New Testament, eventually becoming less dependent on transliterating passages in order to interpret them; and she continued to write in Cherokee.

Mrs. Carey's experience can be compared to the way reading and writing are introduced in some elementary schools today: children learn the alphabet, and then they are encouraged to write about whatever they want. They can invent their own spellings if they have not yet learned to spell a word that they want to use. The goal is for children to write and express themselves so that they become excited about writing and want to learn to read what they have written and what others write. Students should then want to learn to spell properly in order to read more easily and to have their writings more easily read.

Many Cherokee speakers say that they want to learn to read the syllabary, but very few actually do learn to read. If Mrs. Carey can be regarded as at all typical, then learning to write may stimulate people to learn to read, and it may be useful to encourage people to write if literacy is to be maintained. But two aspects of traditional Cherokee culture may tend to discourage writing. First, the attitude of some conservative Cherokees that the syllabary is only appropriate for use in sacred contexts will tend to prevent some people from writing anything at all. So it may be important to foster the use of Cherokee writing in a wide range of sacred and secular contexts, as Feeling and others are doing.

Second, many Cherokees believe that it is possible to teach people to read and write the Cherokee language simply by teaching the syllabary chart. They believe that if one knows the syllabary, then one will automatically know how to read.⁹ This belief is encouraged by the fact that many literate Cherokees tend to speak as though their ability to read the syllabary came to them almost effortlessly (see Walker 1981:172-4). In fact, learning to use the syllabary involves much more than just memorizing a syllabary chart. Readers must learn to interpret the transliterations that appear on syllabary charts. They must learn various spelling conventions, and they must learn that the syllabary does not provide an unambiguous representation of the sound of Cherokee. Sometimes people try to teach themselves the syllabary chart, thinking that their study will lead immediately to the ability to read the language. Once they have learned all the symbols and find that they cannot necessarily read what they see, they become frustrated and feel foolish that they have failed at what they think

⁹Some people believe that teaching the syllabary is equivalent to teaching the language. As a result, people sometimes try to teach the syllabary to non-speakers as a way of teaching the Cherokee language, and the teachers and students alike become frustrated when students learn symbols but not the language.

should be a simple task. This perceived failure discourages people from pursuing their efforts. It can be difficult to persuade people that even though learning the syllabary chart does not immediately result in learning to read or write, learning the syllabary chart can be a good first step, and that trying to write, even if the initial products are imperfect, can lead to good reading and writing skills.

The success of efforts to maintain literacy in Cherokee may depend upon people's willingness to use the syllabary in a wide range of contexts, and their understanding of the difficulties that may arise as they learn to use the syllabary. If literacy is not maintained, we lose an important component of Cherokee culture, and we lose access to a wealth of archival materials--documents written by and for Cherokees over the course of the past 175 years.

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